New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1953

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NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"Hazel Flagg"

New York Post

February 12, 1953

By Richard Watts Jr.

A New Broadway Musical Comedy

It could hardly be said that "Hazel Flagg," which opened at the Mark Hellinger last night, adds anything to the current distinction of the popular American musical play, but it is a loud, lively, lavish and exuberant show, for which Robert Alton has staged some dynamic dance numbers, and I'll be greatly surprised if it isn't a big box-office hit. Although it has a "book" with aspirations toward satire, it seems more like a revue than a comedy with music, and, while I would say that it is somewhat lacking in inspiration, there is enough vigorous entertainment in it to satisfy most audience demands.

Since it is based on Ben Hecht's "Nothing Sacred," one of the few motion pictures within memory with a legitimate claim to being considered satirical, the most surprising thing about "Hazel Flagg" to me is that Mr. Hecht's satire isn't more effective on the stage. The story of the conquest of sentimental New York by a girl who is supposedly dying of radium poisoning, but is actually in good health, the plot makes fun of publicity, magazine promotion, politicians, doctors and other convenient targets, but the mockery isn't very incisive, and most of the time is wisely occupied with the music and dances.

The Singing Mayor

The wisdom of this is indicated by the fact that the most successfully satirical feature of "Hazel Flagg" is a song. When the veteran and ageless Jack Whiting, who is playing a jaunty mayor of New York—the period, it should be noted, is the early thirties—goes into a wonderfully inane ballad called "Every Street's a Boulevard in Old New York," the evening takes on the virtue of gay and imaginative lampooning at its best and most engaging. Mr. Whiting hasn't a very large role in the new musical play, but it is my impression that he quite handsomely wraps up the show and makes it his own in that one number.

Both the music of Jule Styne and the lyrics of Bob Hilliard are represented in their most skillful vein in the mayor's song, but there are several other numbers that seem sure to win wide popularity. There is a good romantic song known as "How Do You Speak to an Angel?" which is certainly of hit proportions, and Helen Gallagher, who plays the title role, has a lively and effective number called "Laura De Maupassant," which she does admirably. I am not quite clear as to how De Maupassant got into the show, but the results are eminently satisfactory. The rest of the score may be described as pleasant.

Robert Alton

As is likely to be the case in any show with which he is concerned, Mr. Alton's dance numbers have a way of dominating the proceedings. He has staged several admirably dynamic ones for "Hazel Flagg," particularly an episode wherein Hazel dreams of her New York triumphs. The sets by Harry Horner and the costumes by Miles White are properly lavish and colorful, and the show has the unexpected trait of getting better as it goes along. Fortunately, also, things always move at a vigorous pace, and, if there is little that is distinguished on display, there is even less that is boring.

As the girl who achieves the perhaps not-too-considerable feat of fooling New York, Miss Gallagher handles some seven numbers with engaging vitality and skill, although she is more successful in her songs and dances than she is in making Hazel a believable or sympathetic human being. That good actor, Thomas Mitchell, plays with his usual competence the small-town doctor who goes along with Hazel in her hoax. Benay Venuta as a magazine editor and John Howard as a romantic reporter register as well as possible in their somewhat truncated roles. "Hazel Flagg" is a vigorously competent musical show.

"HAZEL FLAGG"

Musical satire by Ben Hecht; music by Jule Styne; lyrics by Bob Hilliard; based on a story by James Street and the movie "Nothing Sacred"; book staged by David Alexander; dances by Robert Alton; scenery by Harry Horner; costumes by Miles White; presented by Mr. Styne in association with Anthony B. Farrell at the Mark Hellinger Theatre, February 11, 1953. The cast:

An Editor.....Dean Campbell
Oleander.....Jonathan Harris
Laura Crew.....Benay Venuta
Wallace Cook.....John Howard
Mr. Billings...Lawrence Weber
Mr. Jenkins.....Robert Lenn
Hazel Flagg....Helen Gallagher
Dr. Downer...Thomas Mitchell
Man on the Street..George Reeder
Bellboy.....Jerry Craig
Maximilian Lavian..John Pelletti
Fireman.....Bill Heyer
Miss Winterbottom.....
Betsy Holland
Mayor of New York..Jack Whiting
Whitey.....Sheree North
Willie.....John Brascia
Dr. Egelhofer.....Ross Martin

Journal American

February 12, 1953

A Talented Cast Led by Gallagher

By JOHN McCLAIN

THE new Jule Styne musical called "Hazel Flagg," which was unfurled at the Mark Hellinger Theatre last night, represents some sort of triumph of noise and tempo over logic; it will stand (for some time, I believe) as a monument to how best to louse-up a pretty good idea and still get away with an acceptable theatrical venture.

You can't even begin to believe a minute of anything that's happening, you don't laugh hilariously, but Robert Alton, a rare genius, has invested it with his own wonderfully stylized numbers and ballets, Styne has provided a popular score, and Helen Gallagher knocks herself out to pull the whole thing together and make you like it.

It isn't "fresh and intimate;" it's big and old and plenty expensive, but it's thoroughly a pro show in the best tradition, and you'll come away rewarded.

The libretto, based on the movie "Nothing Sacred" (but bearing very little resemblance), concerns a girl from Vermont who is dying of radium poisoning. As a publicity stunt a New York magazine arranges to have her and her faithful doctor spend her last remaining weeks in New York.

Skillful Numbers

I hardly need tell you that both she and her doctor know that she is perfectly healthy prior to their arrival in the big city, and the rest of the plot is a frantic effort on the part of the author to keep the idea alive for two acts.

She falls in love with the man from the magazine, she is a civic celebrity, there is a parade in her honor . . . you know, until the horrible moment when her beloved discovers her duplicity.

All this would satisfy exactly nobody if it were not for the skillful and fast moving numbers injected by the Messers. Styne and Alton and performed by an enthusiastic assembly of principals and their highly vocal and athletic supporting players.

There is a rousing opening, featuring the authoritative singing of Benay Venuta; a solid introductory number for Helen Gallagher called "The World Is Beautiful Today," and a little later a show-stopper supplied by Jack Whiting, a champ in anybody's song-and-dance album.

This is called "Every Street's a Boulevard in Old New York"—the Mayor of the City selling it in a manner reminiscent of the late Jimmy Walker.

At the close of the act there is the best song of the show, "I Feel Like I'm Gonna Live Forever" from Miss Gallagher and, shortly thereafter, her most ambitious dance number, a jive ballet with John Brascia and the company entitled "You're Gonna Dance With Me Willie."

Helen Is Tops

The second act is less easily sustained, due to some strange convolutions in the plot, but there is still a notable "Dream Parade" by the entire cast, a fine grind number by Sheree North, and a single song and dance by Miss Gallagher named "Laura De Maupassant," in which she envisions herself a Parisian FEMME FATALE. This drew prolonged plaudits.

As stated, everybody owes Helen Gallagher an enormous debt; she sings well, dances with great distinction and succeeds in making herself otherwise almost believable.

Thomas Mitchell, as the doctor, struggles valiantly with a role that is rarely very funny and John Howard, as the leading man is pleasant and assured, at the same time revealing a very agreeable singing voice.

Harry Horner has run up some extremely practical and imaginative sets and flats, and Pembroke Davenport has assembled a first-rate pit orchestra, giving the score the zing it deserves.

But I should think the real hero of the evening is Robert Alton. He supplied the pace that pays.

The New York Times

February 12, 1953

Helen Gallagher in the Title Part of a Musical Comedy About New York City

By BROOKS ATKINSON

To judge by "Hazel Flagg," which opened at the Mark Hellinger last evening, borrowing from the movies may not be such a bad thing. This is the musical show that has been manufactured out of the screen play "Nothing Sacred" of 1937, and it turns out to be a fast and brassy Broadway show. Book by Ben Hecht, who also ran up the little movie number; music by Jule Styne, who is in a loud and cynical mood; verse compositions by Bob Hilliard, who is breezy and impudent.

And let's not forget the artists, for they are in fine fettle, too. Helen Gallagher, who was inflaming "Pal Joey" until quite recently, is now igniting the title part, especially when the plot lets her go into one of her spinning dances. As a Vermont doctor abetting Hazel Flagg in swindling New York City, Thomas Mitchell spreads a streak of fine Irish humor through the proceedings. John Howard, who has a reassuring baritone voice, sings love songs with commendable conviction. And here comes Benay Venuta, the whirling blonde, pouring vitamins into the part of a magazine editor.

Trace this rumpus back far enough and you will find that the plot comes from a James Street story. It is one that New Yorkers ought to relish, for it shows how a couple of Vermont Yankees make suckers out of our high-pressure civilians. A dynamic magazine discovers a Vermont girl reported to be suffering from radium poisoning, with only three more months to live and a desire to spend them having a good time. The magazine goes all out to make her declining months glamorous. She is not going to die. But she and a local doctor come to New York and are practically drowned in a sea of maudlin hero-worship. Big business and big politics compete in a slobbering campaign to make Hazel's dying weeks sweet, noble, uplifting and horrible.

* * *

All the manufacturers of "Hazel Flagg" have to work themselves ragged to get the plot started. It rests on the show like a dead weight in the beginning. But once the plot gets moving and Miss Gallagher gets her dancing feet under her, everything is sardonically amusing and caustic about the mass hysteria of this town. Jack Whiting has not been around the neighborhood much recently. But now he turns up as a jazzy New York mayor with a wonderfully spurious song called "Every Street's a Boulevard in Old New York" and a sense of humor just malicious enough to suit the occasion.

Robert Alton, maestro of the ballet, has invented some excellent dancing numbers that range from the "Rutland Bounce" square dance to a sulphurous number called "Salome" and danced with a few clothes and a lot of humor by Sheree North. We must not forget to salute John Brascia for dancing with Miss Gallagher when she really starts operating. He gives as much as he gets, which is the best trade practice in dancing partnership.

When the book brings him into the heart of Manhattan, Harry Horner, who has done the scenery, designs his head off making our town look improbable and gay. Miles White has dressed everyone gorgeously. Ambling through the festivities with a stethoscope around his neck, Mr. Mitchell looks as though he didn't believe a word of it. But he enjoys it. For it has a saucy book; some pell-mell music, which Don Walker has taken the trouble to orchestrate with enthusiasm, and a lot of lively dancing. Not to mention Miss Gallagher again.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

February 12, 1953

'Hazel Flagg' Dazzles With People, Props

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

This "Hazel Flagg" is loaded. In fact, it is about the most loaded show you can ever hope to see. It has so much scenery and so many costumes, and so many people and songs and dances, that they all seem to overlap each other.

As you might expect from any show Robert Alton is connected with, 'Hazel Flagg" is at its dazzling best when everybody on stage is kicking up his heels. The musical is a takeoff on Manhattan life. The Roseland scene, the parade, the square dance and the cowboy night club number are terpsichorean infernos.

New York Fling.

The story, once made into an extraordinary movie, tells the adventures of a village girl who is offered a fling around New York, when everybody mistakenly thinks she is dying of radium poisoning. To get the trip she pretends the bad news is real, and this hoax of hers leads to some fairly gruesome jokes. In the long run, and fortunately, the book is mainly important for the way it uses Thomas Mitchell as the Doctor, and serves as a springboard for Helen Gallagher to participate in, and dream about, big city life.

Billing never made a star, and Miss Gallagher is not one to push her luck. She gives the show the works, is sparing with bows, and never crams the spotlight. Her voice in a ballad often has the old Garland ring, and she proves again, as she did in "Pal Joey," that she can handle a comedy song with the best.

Nobody in the theater can define so clean a speedy comic dance as she can. When her lines want laughs she can zing them out into space like a shot-put champ. She sings her opening numbers like an early-morning bird, and ends up with a comic vocal tango that combines all the things she does the best. She should be a proud baby today.

Nice Balance.

Thomas Mitchell is largely responsible for the story's being as enjoyable as it is. He makes the situation human and funny without ever forgetting his dignity.

One of last night's biggest delights was Jack Whiting's performance as the Mayor in the Thirties. Mr. Whiting is that modern rarity, a performer who believes musicals are just for fun. He plays with a floppy engaging style that is elegant and infinitely generous. With "Every Street" he stopped the show stone cold, delivering the ballad with really tasty irony.

A fluffy platinum blonde named Sheree North did a bit of the same thing with a dance about Salome.

In top-billed roles are Benay Venuta, working heartily on the pretty thankless part of the magazine editor who dreams up the whole excursion for Hazel, and John Howard, who has the show's best song, "How Do You Speak to an Angel?" and very little else.

Miles White must have created as many costumes for "Hazel Flagg" as he does for a new edition of the circus. He has an unequaled eye for electric color, and outshines himself with the glint of the Roseland outfits and the fantastic night club and parade uniforms.

NEW YORK **Herald Tribune**

February 12, 1953

'Hazel Flagg'

By WALTER F. KERR

SOME years ago Ben Hecht wrote a splendidly bilious screenplay called "Nothing Sacred," and moviegoers with memories are quick to recall its mordant and sardonic lunacy. "Nothing Sacred" told the preposterous tale of a small-town wench who thought she was about to die of radium poisoning and the big-town opportunists who contrived to make a Roman holiday of her last sad days on earth. Hicks, shysters, and sentimental boobs wallowed in a frantic free-for-all of phoney emotion, and Mr. Hecht went after them with a knife-edge of humor exactly suited to his jaundiced view of the species.

In "Hazel Flagg," which opened at the Hellinger last night, this irreverent fancy has been decked out in acres of Harry Horner scenery, hundreds of Miles White costumes, a whirlwind of Robert Alton dance steps, and a bagful of Jule Styne tunes. It has been staffed with attractive personalities—Helen Gallagher, Thomas Mitchell, Benay Venuta, Jack Whiting—and punched up to the tempo of 1953. But the caustic humors which were its principal distinction lie buried beneath the embellishments.

Somewhere along the line Mr. Hecht's point of view has been softened, his vision glazed; and "Hazel Flagg" turns up as a highly conventional musical comedy on an unlikely and overextended theme.

The show has not only been set in the '30s—it seems to have borrowed heavily on the stage methods of that not especially interesting era. There is a razzmatazz opening with the chorus girls and boys flinging themselves about in bland irrelevance. There is a strong feeling that any old song cue will do (as a farewell gesture to the New York-bound heroine, standing on the back platform of a departing train, the local folk romp right into something called "The Rutland Bounce"). Newsboys run along New York streets calling their extras to keep you up with the plot. That Parisian dress designer minces in and provides immediate excuse for the entrance of dancers wielding violins, an exotic fashion parade and a song

called "Paris Gown." There is a dance contest at Roseland (with costumes cheating back into the reliable '20), a sequence at a banquet table and a dream ballet.

* * *

If any of this were tongue-in-cheek enough to suggest a spoof, "Hazel Flagg" might have a theatrical joke to merchandise. But only once in the evening does the kidding become clear. In the middle of the first act Jack Whiting put in an appearance as the dapper Mayor of the big town, and he turns the stage upside down with an idiotic inspiration called "Every Street's a Boulevard in Old New York." As he ankles, struts, leers and whispers through clenched teeth he becomes a magnificent parody of every night-club or Palace entertainer you ever saw. Satire suddenly rears its head, and you get a fleeting image of what author Hecht and composer Styne may have had in mind for "Hazel Flagg."

* * *

There are other hopeful moments scattered through the energetic enterprise at the Hellinger. A University Glee Club solemnly intoning a chorale by way of providing morale for the doomed heroine makes for a few seconds' fun. So does a burlesque sob song called "Radium Gal." Once in awhile Thomas Mitchell, as the country doctor who has come along for the ride, gets in a barbed shaft that suggests the old and not so gentle Hecht.

And Helen Gallagher, looking springlike and bewitched in her first starring role, gets two rousing opportunities to cut loose: once in a dancehall frenzy called "You're Gonna Dance With Me, Willie," and again—late in the evening—with a wicked and walloping ballad labeled "Laura de Maupassant."

But Robert Alton's dances—dynamic as they are—are randomly designed; they never do catch the malicious impudence, the exact and biting tone, of his work throughout "Pal Joey." They are, indeed, symptomatic of the trouble with "Hazel Flagg"—they move fast, they shine brightly, but they don't say anything sassy. The bite has gone out of a once brilliant antic.

Daily Mirror

February 12, 1953

'Hazel Flagg' Opens At The Mark Hellinger

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Some of the theatre's foremost talents have combined to give us "Hazel Flagg," a musical which arrived at the Mark Hellinger last evening under the Jule Styne banner. Perhaps the names involved caused us to expect more than we got. For, despite some highly enjoyable sequences, it was, on the whole, disappointing.

It is amazing that so gifted a scripter as Ben Hecht shouldn't have put more of genuine merit into the book, which is based on a successful movie called "Nothing Sacred." It lacks real humor, and develops too little sympathy for the heroine. It makes stabs at satire, and misses the target.

* * *

THE HEROINE is told by a small-town doctor that radium poisoning will cause her death in three weeks. A national magazine hears about it, and offers to bring her to New York for a final fling. Of course, it will cash in on the publicity. Before entraining for the big city, she learns that the bumbling physician has made a mistake.

Knowing the facts, she nevertheless accepts the trip. Our burg puts on a real carnival, and the reporter assigned to the story falls in love with her. Then through a hocus-pocus twist, the giddy kid manages to escape the consequences of the fraud. She puts it over on us twice.

Helen Gallagher, who soared to popularity in "Make a Wish" and "Pal Joey," gives a terrific performance as the village belle who hoaxes the city slickers. She has looks, vitality and irresistible sparkle. She emerges as a welcome new star, doing more for "Hazel Flagg" than it does for her.

* * *

THOMAS MITCHELL, deserting the legit for the musical stage, has some hilarious moments as the medico with a big heart and dubious skill. John Howard is a manly, likable, hoodwinked writer. And Benay Venuta displays the authority of a veteran trouper as the overly enthusiastic mag editor.

But the show stealer of the evening is Jack Whiting. Once a top juvenile, he is now cast as a playboy mayor. He sings and soft-shoes "Every Street's a Boulevard in Old New York" into a sock hit. He had the first-nighters rolling in the aisles and blistering their palms for encores.

Producer Styne doubles in brass as composer of the score. Teamed with lyricist Bob Hilliard, he has turned out several songs that should rock the radio and record business. Already the diskers have made waxings of "How Do You Speak to an Angel?" "The World Is Beautiful Today," "I Feel Like I'm Gonna Live Forever," "You're Gonna Dance With Me, Willie" and "Salome."

* * *

AND BOB ALTON, who worked wonders with the revival of "Pal Joey," has supplied some frenzied, red-hot hoofing. Bob, believing that lugubrious ballet is passe, has gone back to first principles with telling effect. Harry Horner has designed lavish sets, and Miles White opulent costumes.

There is so much to like about "Hazel Flagg" that we wish there were more. We can only recommend it with reservations, to those who don't expect distinction. At its best, it's swell. But it's not at its best often enough.

W. W. Says:
Alton, Gallagher & Whiting. In Songs, Dances and not-so-Witty Sayings.

DAILY NEWS

February 12, 1953

Attractive Cast, Splendid Dances Highlight a Musical, 'Hazel Flagg'

By JOHN CHAPMAN

"Hazel Flagg," which opened last evening at the Mark Hellinger Theatre, has almost everything necessary to make it a superior musical except songs. Jule Styne, the producer, has outfitted his show handsomely and has cast it well, but Jule Styne, the songwriter, could only make me fidget last evening. The music is loud and syncopated, or, when it comes to a ballad or two, banal.

Mitchell in Good Role.

For me the evening's big moment was the appearance of Jack Whiting, as slim, young, energetic and friendly as ever, in the role of a New York mayor who could have been James J. Walker. When Whiting put over a number titled "Every Street's a Boulevard in Old New York" I was happy—happy to see him again and happy in the memories of the days in which "Hazel Flagg" takes place. For "Hazel Flagg" is a period piece, the period being 1930. From this number on, I kept hearing in my imagination many of the songs from the jazzy times of the late 1920s and early 30s—Whiting singing "I've Got Five Dollars," maybe, or Helen Kane going boop-a-doop, or Zelma O'Neal doing "Button Up Your Overcoat."

There are other very good moments in "Hazel Flagg." For instance, several of the dances by Helen Gallagher, who plays the title role, and in particular a turn she does with John Brascia, who is a remarkably good dancer. For another instance, anything Thomas Mitchell has to do on the stage, for Mitchell is a wise comedian and he is in the comfortable role of a drunken doctor—the same guy he played in "Stage Coach." And, for many instances, all of the ensemble dances, for Robert Alton has staged them and he is the best director in the business for a fast-stepping musical.

The plot of the musical has been derived by Ben Hecht from a story by James Street and a movie called "Nothing Sacred." It's about a girl from a hick town in Vermont who has supposedly got radium poisoning from painting watch dials in the local ticker factory. Old Doc Mitchell has given her three weeks to live, and the girl says she wants to have a good time for these three weeks.

Three Weeks to Live.

A New York magazine editor (Benay Venuta, another pleasant memory) sees a big story in the moribund Hazel and fetches her to the metropolis for a grand last whirl. It eventuates that Hazel doesn't have radium poisoning at all, but in New York she naturally comes down with a bad case of love. John Howard, another very pleasant member of the cast, is the object of her new ailment.

From the talk I heard before going into the theatre I gathered that a song called "How Do You Speak to an Angel" is the Big Number. So all right. If they say it's the big number, it is. It's the Styne song.

Harry Horner's various scenes around Vermont and New York City are smart and gay, and so are Miles White's 1930 costumes. A gentleman with the utterly sober name of Pembroke Davenport directs a frenzied orchestra. I copied down one joke during the evening. Miss Gallagher, who is an energetic, impish and attractive comedienne as well as being an excellent dancer, wonders why she got drunk at a party and Old Doc Mitchell didn't. 'You're littler. You fill up quicker," says Mitchell.

"On Borrowed Time"

Journal-American

February 11, 1953

It's Got Moore—And It's Merry

By JOHN McCLAIN

It is almost impossible to imagine that "On Borrowed Time" could have been written for anybody but Victor Moore, who heads the cast in the revival which opened at the Forty-Eighth Street Theatre last night. Nobody else in the world could offer such wistful humor and heartbreak or could bring such honesty to Paul Osborn's dependable little consideration of life and death and the love of an old man for a boy.

Here is a play devoid of messages and oblique symbolism, a simple fantasy in which commonplace characters read homely lines and yet manage to get across a large measure of comedy and pathos. This is still good basic construction and writing, and one comes away with a sense of quiet warmth and fulfillment.

Death's Up a Tree

The strength of the central theme derives from the mutual affection shared by Moore and his orphaned grandson, played by David John Stollery.

Gramps is getting old and after his wife dies one of the boy's aunts shows up and attempts to get legal custody of him with a weather eye on the insurance money.

At this point a Mr. Brink, who has already been introduced as the symbol of Death, comes calling for Gramps.

Realizing that his exodus would mean leaving the kid to the mercy of the aunt, Gramps chases Mr. Brink up an apple tree and keeps him imprisoned there. As long as he is thus out of action nobody on earth can die.

The rest of the proceedings concern the efforts of various townspeople and the aunt to outsmart the old man and get Death back in business—and Gramps' ingenious and final compromise.

This performance of Victor Moore's should rank with the best in his long and lustreful career. Here he has every chance to pull out all the stops: he is pixyish and pathetic and brittle, by turns, and he has the great moment, of course, when he clings to the lad in tears, refusing to give him up.

He does a little jig now and then, throws one of the actors to the floor and attacks him with a shovel, and at another juncture stands two of them off with a revolver for most of an hilarious scene.

Moore and Merry

Through all of this he is skillfully abetted by Master Stollery, who gives another of those incredible child performances as the grandson, and by Beulah Bondi, as his loving and critical wife.

Leo G. Carroll, as Mr. Brink, is limited to some rather unrewarding appearances between the branches of the apple tree and brief scenes on the ground, but the authority of his voice alone makes his selection for the role rational.

Kay Hammond is suitably irritating as the maiden aunt and Russell Hicks and Thayer Roberts are, as ever, highly competent as the lawyer and the doctor.

Melinda Markey, daughter of Joan Bennett, makes her debut in this one and is given alight chance to do anything. But fortunately she doesn't have to, being one of the most decorative young ladies unveiled this season.

Marshall Jamison has directed with what I thought to be a fair sense of how best to complement Mr. Moore, and Paul Morrison has devised a single set which gets a tree and part of a house onstage with a minimum of confusion.

"On Borrowed Time" isn't pretentious or purposeful. But it's got Moore—and it's merry.

"ON BORROWED TIME"

Comedy by Paul Osborn; adapted from the novel of the same name by Lawrence Edward Watkin; staged by Marshall Jamison; setting and costumes by Paul Morrison; presented by Richard W. Krakeur and Randolph Hale in association with William G. Costin, Jr., at the Forty-Eighth Street Theatre, February 10, 1953. The cast:

Pud.....David John Stollery
Julian Northrup (Gramps)....
Victor Moore
Nellie (Granny)...Beulah Bondi
Mr. Brink.....Leo G. Carroll
Marcia Giles...Melinda Markey
Demetria Riffle..Kay Hammond
A Boy.....Robert Kaline
A Workman.....Gerald Milton
Dr. Evans.....Thayer Roberts
Mr. Pilbeam.....Russell Hicks
Mr. Grimes....Michael Jeffrey
Sheriff.....Larry Barton

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

February 11, 1953

Borrowed Time' Is Undimmed by Years

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Not another attraction on Broadway more admirably fulfills what it sets out to do than "On Borrowed Time." It is fascinating to find the affectionate comedy has not aged one minute in the 15 years since it was first done.

All the quality and mood and flavor of the earthy, fantastic fable are caught with loving exactness in this production. It is Victor Moore's evening, but he is beautifully supported every moment by his co-stars and the rest of the cast.

Improper but Right.

It takes rare thinking apparatus to write entertainingly about death. Both the novelist and the dramatizers of "On Borrowed Time" had it. What they told is a love story between a little boy and his grandfather, who discovers a way to literally get death up a tree.

The old man is alarmed at the prospect of his own passing, because it will make the youngster the ward of a mean, intolerant spinster. Gramps has brought him up as a cussing, imaginative, courageous boy. He does nothing proper, but everything right.

With Death out on a limb, the whole world changes, but feisty little Gramps sticks to his resolve. The mystical escort, Mr. Brink, finally makes his way down from the apple branches, when he shows Gramps that Death is an invaluable friend in need.

Once in a long time in the theater one is lucky enough to see the magical meeting of perfect actor for perfect role, at just the right instant for both. That can rarely have happened more felicitously than it does with Victor Moore's playing of Gramps.

Curtain Speech.

In his curtain speech last night, the beloved star announced his age as 76 this month. He also admitted that, having cheated on the dark shade of his hair for 30 years, he is now peroxided white.

Shuffling around in his baggy pants, trying to be a sport for the boy and a gentleman for his beloved wife, Mr. Moore is as real as it is possible to be in the theater. It may surprise you too, if you expect a familiar personality, to discover him acting to the hilt a tricky role entirely different from the dazed Milquetoast he has been so famous for for so many years.

Everybody seems to be giving his best to this production. As Mr. Brink, Leo G. Carroll has a suave authority that is other-worldly in its patient demands. Beulah Bondi plays with infinite delicacy the infirm grandmother, blending testiness with real affection until all her relationships are true.

A Real Boy.

David John Strollery is one of the best juvenile actors to hit our boards in many a year. He is all boy in his role, and all honesty as a performer.

Marshall Jamison has directed the comedy at exactly the right casual pace, so all its laughs can be enjoyed to the full, and Paul Morrison designs a homely set in the same idiom of no nonsense that characterizes the play.

The New York Times
February 11, 1953

Victor Moore Plays Gramps in the Revival of Paul Osborn's 'On Borrowed Time'

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Victor Moore has brought us another part as ideal for him as Throttlebottom and just as irresistible in the theatre. He is playing Gramps in the new production of Paul Osborn's "On Borrowed Time," which opened at the Forty-eighth Street last evening and will not close for quite a long time. Even when Dudley Digges was playing the part here in 1938—and with great enchantment, too— Mr. Moore was playing it on the West Coast. The part is not something he has just thought up to dispel the boredom of comfortable retirement.

But by the time he has released Mr. Brink from that necromantic tree you are likely to assume either that the part was written for him or that he has been improvising it line by line all through the evening. Gramps is Victor Moore or Victor Moore is Gramps. At the moment, which is not long after the final curtain, there does not seem to be any way of disentangling one from the other.

Of course, he looks like Gramps. The high, bald dome and the shaggy fringe of white hair, the fretful look around the mouth, the suggestion of caution in the eyes seen through the rimmed spectacles, the pudgy walk—are Gramps in every particular. But that voice is expressive, too. It has a kind of casual weariness most of the time.

But it can also be pettish when things are not going pleasantly enough. When Pud is stupid or Miss Nellie is difficult or Demetria is maddening, Mr. Moore sounds shrill, like a peevish old man in his second childhood. As Throttlebottom, Mr. Moore was comically pathetic. As Gramps he is a man of fortitude and lonely decision.

"On Borrowed Time" is the comedy that Mr. Osborn made from a novel of the same title by Lawrence Edward Watkin. Strictly speaking, it is a fantasy. Mr. Brink is the angel of death. He comes to collect Gramps at an inconvenient moment. If Gramps goes, his grandson, Pud, will go to Aunt Demetria who will make a sissy out of him. Gramps insists on staying alive to prevent such an atrocity. And "On Borrowed Time" is the fable of how for a day or so Gramps traps Mr. Brink in an apple tree. By neutralizing death he holds back the normal business of the universe.

No man in his right mind will believe any such thing. But you can hardly avoid believing nearly every word of it in the theatre. For Mr. Osborn has written it with the familiar style of a local story full of homely episodes. Paul Morrison has designed a hospitable setting for it, and Marshall Jamison has directed it with taste and humor.

Leo G. Carroll, another immensely likable actor, plays Mr. Brink with quizzical expertness. Beulah Bondi acts Gramps' tired, mistrustful wife with a sweetness that is never cloying. As Pud, David John Stollery (quite an imposing monicker for so brief a lad) is affectionate and enjoyable, and Thayer Roberts, Melinda Markey, Kay Hammond and Russell Hicks give sound performances in other parts.

But Mr. Moore is the actor who makes "On Borrowed Time" so comic, so moving and so believable. He says he will be 76 on Feb. 24, although there are statisticians here in the office who say 77. Whatever the exact age, a lot of years have gone into this droll performance—a lot of skill in timing, a lot of intuitive variations in inflection and an abundance of goodwill. Mr. Moore is going to make a lot more friends before "On Borrowed Time" wears out its welcome.

DAILY NEWS
February 11, 1953

Victor Moore Caps His Career as 'Gramps' in 'On Borrowed Time'

By JOHN CHAPMAN

In "On Borrowed Time" the gently persuasive messenger from beyond who calls himself Mr. Brink is allowed by Gramps to come down from the apple tree, so that the ailing, outworn and outmoded beings of this perishable world may be removed into the tranquil domain of eternity. Dear old Gramps simply had to let Mr. Brink come down, so that what was finished with here might die normally and decently. But Gramps must have made a private bargain with Mr. Brink—a deal whereby Paul Osborn's "On Borrowed Time" must be allowed to live far past the lifetime of most plays.

Osborn's sentimental and comic fantasy, which was adapted from a novel by Lawrence Edward Watkin, opened in New York in 1938, and nobody who was there will ever forget its first performance, with Dudley Digges as Gramps, Peter Holden as Pud and Frank Conroy as Mr. Brink. Last evening the play opened again at the 48th St. Theatre, and I don't expect that anybody who was there will ever forget it, either.

Moore's Great Triumph.

Here was a perfect play. Not a big one, not a grand one, not even an important one—just a perfect play. And here was a perfect performance. And here was I, way down front, shedding tears of pure delight. And there, up on the stage, was Victor Moore, who will be 76 years old the 24th of this month, giving the performance of his long and endearing lifetime. With him up there were splendid people—Leo G. Carroll as Mr. Brink, David John Stollery as Pud, Beulah Bondi as Granny and all the others of the most charming theatrical company in town.

Few actors deserve to step into the shoes of the late Dudley Digges in any of the roles Digges played. Maybe only one actor does, and he is Victor Moore. At one moment Moore is a quavering ancient waiting for the grave; at the next he is a spunky and vigorous gent denouncing Aunt Demetria as a pismire and a bird-stuffer. And for every minute he is lovable and a most canny actor.

The Cast Measures Up.

This new company is lovable all down the line. Young Stollery, as Pud, Moore's grandson, is a joy in an honest performance of a small boy. Miss Bondi is lovely and touching as Granny. Carroll is, as always, a superb actor as Mr. Brink, and there are attractive or humorous performances by Melinda Markey, Kay Hammond, Russell Hicks, Thayer Roberts and others who have been skillfully directed by Marshall Jamison.

Even young people today must know something about "On Borrowed Time," for it has been done often on TV and radio. It's the story about Gramps tricking Mr. Brink, the messenger of death, into climbing a magical tree so that Gramps may continue to live and protect little Pud from that pismire and bird-stuffer, Aunt Demetria. It is one of the loveliest plays of the modern American theatre.

Daily Mirror
February 11, 1953

'On Borrowed Time' Is Sheer Enchantment

By ROBERT COLEMAN

We contend that when you can't find a good new play to produce, the best thing is to revive a good old one. And that's just what Richard Krakeur and Randolph Hale, in association with William Costin, Jr., have done. They have persuaded Victor Moore to star again in Paul Osborn's fascinating comedy, "On Borrowed Time."

Fantasy is one of the most difficult facets of theatrical art to bring off successfully. It requires great skill, soaring imagination, plenty of heart and, if possible, a goodly measure of humor. And Osborn brought all these qualities to his dramatization of Lawrence Edward Watkin's novel.

ANYONE WHO ever saw this endearing play when it was first presented back in 1938 by the late Dwight Deere Wiman will doubtless want to enjoy it again. And those who missed it then should rush to the Forty-Eighth Street Theatre to make the acquaintance of the salty Gramps Northrup and his delightful grandson, Pud.

Gramps is a lovable old cuss who chases Death up into an apple tree, when beckoned into a better world. This he does in order to save young Pud from falling into the hands of a grasping and determined aunt who would make him into a sissy. But we shan't tell you any more about the charming fable. It might lessen your pleasure when you see it.

Dudley Digges created the role of Gramps on Broadway, while the beloved Victor Moore did it on the Coast. Digges' performance, as we recall it, was more robust, more commanding. But Moore's almost hesitant, less vigorous approach to the part also has its merits. It is sensitive, warming and winning.

DAVID JOHN STOLLERY is most attractive as Pud, the real boy who doesn't want to be transformed into a Little Lord Fountleroy. Leo G. Carroll is excellent as the mysterious Mr. Brink, and Beulah Bondi has some fine moments as Granny. Thayer Roberts, long absent from the stage, stands out as the perplexed Dr. Evans.

Joan Bennett's pretty and gifted daughter, Melinda Mar-

key, makes an auspicious New York bow as a sympathetic member of the household. She has inherited the Bennett touch and promises to carry on a distinguished tradition creditably. Kay Hammond and Russell Hicks do well by other roles.

In staging "On Borrowed Time" for Broadway, director Marshall Jamison has paced the script admirably to Moore's inimitable style. It is a style that has become a national institution, often copied by other comedians but never successfully reproduced. It is one of the glories of our theatre.

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WERE WE A YOUNG playwright, we most certainly would study "On Borrowed Time." Just as we would study "The Male Animal" and "The Children's Hour," which also have had recent revivals. Because they are first-rate examples of the dramatist's craft.

They are plays written to be acted as well as read in the library. They are more than good dialogue. They have plot, roles for players to relish and rewarding ideas. They are genuine theatre, something we get too little of these days.

We were swept into another world last evening, a world of sheer enchantment. It was good to be in the theatre again, to have a perfectly wonderful time. We think you will, too.

New York Post

February 11, 1953

By Richard Watts Jr.

Revival of an Engaging Fantasy

When it was first produced here in 1938, "On Borrowed Time" achieved merited critical and popular success, because it was a fantasy about death that possessed saltiness and humor, rather than lugubrious mysticism or unhealthy decadence. Revived last night at the 48th Street Theater by a West Coast company headed by the justifiably-cherished Victor Moore, Paul Osborn's celebrated comedy, which has become something of a minor American classic, may have lost some of its old-time gustiness, but it is still warm, imaginative and charming.

"On Borrowed Time," you should recall, is the story of how old Gramps, who wouldn't have minded dying save that it would have forced him to leave behind his beloved grandson, Pud, in the rapacious hands of an unworthy aunt, chased Death, in the person of a mysterious fellow called Mr. Brink, up an apple tree and kept him there, thereby suspending mortality throughout the world. It is the tale of how Gramps remained stubborn, even though he was persuaded that Mr. Brink was needed by suffering mankind, but finally went off with him and Pud for a happy ending.

Although Mr. Osborn's dramatization of a fable by Lawrence Edward Watkin does grow a little philosophical in its final stretches, it is basically gay, bright and given to healthy laughter. Its great virtue is that, despite its sentimental warmth, it evades excessive saccharinity or platitudinous metaphysics and never permits morbidness to get in the way of its high spirits. The current production lacks the vitality and raciness that were so marked in the original presentation, but there is enough of its basic quality left to save it.

There is something completely irresistible in both the humor and the sweetness of Mr. Moore, and he is, of course, a delight as embattled old Gramps. He does lack the sly touch of salty toughness that the late and unforgettable Dudley Digges employed to transform Gramps into the most engaging of ancient reprobates, and I suspect that the characterization loses in the transformation, but he is nonetheless loveable without being too soft, and I imagine only those of us who saw Mr. Digges in the part will experience even the most minor disappointment.

Two Mr. Brinks

Please don't blame a veteran theatergoer for falling back on his memories, but I must also tell you about the way Frank Conroy played Mr. Brink in the original edition. He made him a brisk and businesslike traveling salesman, filled with heartiness and the instincts of the back-slapper and without any time to waste on the mysterious or the sinister. The result, it seems to me, was more entertaining than Leo G. Carroll's slightly baleful impersonation. But Mr. Carroll is one of our finest actors, and I am sure only quibblers would note the difference.

Beulah Bondi plays the grandmother pleasantly and conventionally, and young David John Stollery is, I suppose, good enough as the boy Pud. There is a fresh and charming portrayal of a sympathetic girl by Melinda Markey, a youthful actress with a trace of radiance about her, and I liked Kay Hammond as the villainous aunt and Thayer Roberts and Russell Hicks as bewildered observers. The staging struck me as a bit stolid, but "On Borrowed Time" remains a fantasy of considerable beguilement. There is still something endearing about it.

New York Herald Tribune

February 11, 1953

'On Borrowed Time'

By WALTER F. KERR

THE absolute belief which Victor Moore and a perfectly cast company bring to Paul Osborn's daring and delectable fantasy, "On Borrowed Time," makes it seem spry as ever after fifteen years. The play has long since been recognized as a small model of theatrical cunning. Its materials are as fragile and elusive as dramatic materials can safely get: an old man who is about to be nudged into the hereafter manages to chase Death up a tree and keep him there until he has saved his adoring grandson from the clutches of a greedy aunt.

Mr. Osborn's skill in sustaining this delicate flirtation with the macabre, in making a lighthearted dalliance with death seem earthy and pungent and funny, was evident enough in 1938, when the tricky little piece had a resounding success.

But it still needs playing, and it gets just the playing it needs at the 48th St. Victor Moore is "Gramps" Northrup, sitting around in moth-eaten shirtsleeves, cussing and smoking and scandalizing all the proper folk as he tries to help young Pud grow up.

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What is best about Mr. Moore is that he will have no truck with that second-rate sentimentality, that fey archness, which might easily invade the role. He indulges the boy with a magnificent sobriety, explaining that birds don't carry watch-fobs in a tone that hasn't a trace of fatherly patronage in it.

He deals with his heavenly visitor—here called Mr. Brink—with such straight-from-the-shoulder cantankerousness that you are drawn into the fight before you have had time to question its fanciful premise. And he is so magnificently splenetic with his most unattractive relative, shaking with rage at the aunt who would capture Pud for herself and doing a demonic little dance of mockery for her benefit, that you know this fire-eater never inhabited a mere fairy-tale. The tart and crosspatch irritability make it all possible; and when it is time for this endearing actor to touch you, he does that gently and plausibly, too. Mr. Moore's "Gramps" is a beautifully rounded performance.

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He is supported all the way by young David John Stollery as Pud. It just happens that we've had a surfeit of boy actors these past few weeks and here, glory be, is one who sounds like a boy. The tight-lipped defiances, the idle repetitions, the tenacious and maniacal reversions to a single subject which Osborn has written into the part are tossed off with superb ease by this appealing and talented performer. His terror when he finds himself unable to get out of a tree is genuine; the pathos of his leave-taking from Gramps is wholly unaffected; and he has the further remarkable virtue of seeming to be thinking relevant thoughts between lines.

Leo G. Carroll brings a starchy rectitude, and a good bit of agreeable humor, to the role of the omnipresent Mr. Brink; Beulah Bondi makes the most of her brief opportunities as a grandmother who is worried about the old rip's influence on Pud but who cannot bring herself to put the boy into the hands of righteous and overbearing people; Thayer Roberts turns in one of the evening's most striking performances as a doctor who is finally caught up in the unlikely victory over death; and Melinda Markey is an exceptionally attractive ingenue.

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There are minor flaws in the production Marshall Jamison has directed at the 48th St. The pacing of the over-all performance is not so much slow as relentlessly even, and there are inevitable hints of lassitude now and then. The third act in particular is allowed to run down after the robust and inspiriting comedy of the second. And Paul Morrison's settings and lighting are not much above stock-company level.

But the figures on stage are glowing with warmth, and "On Borrowed Time" catches their gleam.

"The Emperor's Clothes"

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

February 10, 1953

'The Emperor's Clothes'

By WALTER F. KERR

THE setting which Lester Polakov has created for "The Emperor's Clothes" at the Barrymore is a pretty good clew to author George Tabori's intentions. In the foreground stands a cluttered, humdrum, utterly realistic living-room in the Budapest of 1930. But above and beyond this mirror of everyday life there towers a snowflaked city street, a row of frosted houses right out of a child's story book, complete with smoking chimneys and a starlit sky. Sugar-coated fancy and the confining pressures of ordinary existence are compressed into a single, and very striking, visual image.

Mr. Tabori has clearly intended to make the same sort of contrast—between romance and reality, between idealism and necessity—in his play. Out of some childhood reminiscences which are half nostalgic and half terrifying he has fashioned the fable of a blacklisted schoolteacher whose son worships him as a hero.

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The boy has other heroes: Sherlock Holmes, Raffles, the Scarlet Pimpernel, and, for good measure, Hoot Gibson. In the course of his imaginative flights, he unwittingly attracts the attention of the state police to his father. Hoot Gibson's Hollywood revolt against the wicked cattle barons becomes inextricably involved with the father's one-time liberal speechmaking. The old man is arrested, wilts before the totalitarian onslaught, and the lad loses a hero. Only by making a new, and very bloody, sacrifice can the teacher regain his own integrity and his son's esteem.

There is some perception in this child's-eye view of a savage universe which does not always provide happy endings. And Lee J. Cobb, as the rattled man who is not quite up to playing Sir Galahad in a brutal and irrational society sets at least two of the play's key scenes on fire. In one he must listen with incredulous dismay as a couple of uniformed goons link him with the depredations of a motion-picture cowboy, and then collapse in cowardly anxiety before the accusations. In the other he is asked to turn furiously on his adoring son in an attempt to shatter the boy's innocence by exposing every ugly secret the household possesses. Both scenes teeter constantly on the edge of the absurd; Mr. Cobb makes them scaringly honest.

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But for most of the evening neither Mr. Cobb nor the balance of an excellent company can get past author Tabori's principal, and in many ways appalling, failure. In trying for a mood which will seem at once winsomely juvenile and tough-mindedly pertinent, Mr. Tabori has invented a sort of prose-poetry (it would probably have been called that in the little magazines, long ago) which sets every figure on stage to declaiming, attitudinizing, and all but strangling on unmanageable constructions.

There are doses of stream-of-consciousness, done out loud. One of Mr. Cobb's runs something like this: "What is the truth? Why do we have telephones, anyway? Nobody tells the truth any more. I haven't shaken hands with anyone in years. You were beautiful, Bella."

There are rapid exchanges of telegraphic prose, set in between the mouthfuls, which make it seem as though the characters had barely been introduced to one another. There are three-way conversations which resemble a tape-recorder wildly out of control. There are self-conscious set-pieces in which one family friend or another dwells longingly on the beauties of childhood, escape into the future, or the city at night. Almost no question is ever answered, simply deflected by a new and markedly untidy train of thought. You finally get to waiting for the intermissions to hear the sound of human speech again.

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Maureen Stapleton, as a bewildered mother, suffers most from this rambling, impressionistic and utterly untheatrical literary style. It is Miss Stapleton's lot to specialize in the irrelevant, and to murmur "There's a draft" the moment an hysterical crisis has been concluded. Anthony Ross, as the teacher's level-headed brother, fares rather better with some of the evening's more rococo flights, and Esmond Knight seems to keep some balance during his brief appearances as a solicitous nobleman. Young Brandon de Wilde, however, is made to sound a good bit more of a stick than when he was playing one in "Mrs. McThing."

"The Emperor's Clothes" has a charming idea and at least one intermittently electrifying performance. But its virtues are drowned in a sea of suffocating words.

"THE EMPEROR'S CLOTHES"

Play by George Tabori; staged by Harold Clurman; settings by Lester Polakov; costumes by Ben Edwards; presented by Robert Whitehead in association with The Playwrights' Company at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre, February 9, 1953. The cast:

Elek Odry.....Lee J. Cobb
Bella.....Maureen Stapleton
Ferike.....Brandon de Wilde
Peter.....Anthony Ross
Granny..Tamara Daykarhanova
Baron.....Esmond Knight
1st Rottenbiller Brother.....
Michael Strong
2nd Rottenbiller Brother.....
Mike Kellin
Fat Hugo.....Philip Rodd
Mr. Schmitz..Howard H. Fischer
Mrs. Schmitz...Nydia Westman
Man Without Shoes..David Clarke
A Boy.....Richard Case
Milkman.....Allan Rich
Policeman, Singer.....
John Anderson

New York Post

February 10, 1953

By Richard Watts Jr.

A Striking Drama by George Tabori

The important dramatic theme of the year is clearly the power of the lie in a world dominated by fear and suspicion. As do "The Children's Hour" and "The Crucible," George Tabori's new play, "The Emperor's Clothes," which opened at the Ethel Barrymore Theater last night, deals with the devastation wrought by a child's fable, and takes on ironic contemporary impact of power and significance. Admirably directed by Harold Clurman and acted impressively by Lee J. Cobb and a fine cast, Mr. Tabori's current work captures the sort of devastating forcefulness his earlier effort, "Flight into Egypt," lacked last season.

Although, as in the manner of the dramas by Lillian Hellman and Arthur Miller, innocent people suffer terribly from a child's scorn for the truth, the little boy who causes the trouble in "The Emperor's Clothes" is neither mischievous nor, in fact, a liar. He is merely the possessor of a romantic imagination, fed by English fiction and American Western movies, and, worshipping his unworthy father, he builds him up as a hero to his young friends, a Scarlet Pimpernel or a cowboy fighting the cattle barons. But fear and suspicion are rife in the land, and the thought police are not the men to appreciate a boy's romantic dreams.

Fictional Spies

There is a scene of tremendous effectiveness and bitterly sardonic humor wherein two stupid members of the secret police quiz the boy's father, a long-discharged teacher, about his suspicious involvement with fictional plotters from foreign spy thrillers, and refuse to accept his denial that such people even existed. But Mr. Tabori is not a dramatist to deal in simple black and white, and the father, a selfish and complaining whiner, is far from worthy of his son's idealization. I never quite believed him when, in the final scene, he became something of a hero, but he is at least an entirely believable human being.

For the scene of his significant narrative, Mr. Tabori has gone to one of the simpler and more primitive of the early police states, the Hungary of 1930, and in a land where official thought control apparently was still somewhat in its infancy, he is able to arrange what may approximate a happy ending. It is, however, anything but a cheerful or optimistic play that he has to offer, and there is gloom and dread even in the final curtain of "The Emperor's Clothes." And I think the effect is all the more sinister and impressive because of the atmosphere of a child's romantic fable that surrounds its horrors.

There are things in the Tabori drama that, despite its impressiveness, keep it from being always as overwhelming as it is, for example, in its brilliant second act. It is my impression that it marks time a little too much at the beginning, although this is perhaps preferable to the overcharged prologue of "The Crucible." It seems to me, too, that the character of the father is made excessively whining from the start, which makes his crack-up under police questioning a bit too expected and obvious. Nevertheless, the fact that he is a weak human being, rather than a symbol of persecution, certainly adds to the play's credibility.

Mr. Cobb, who is an actor of prodigious power, plays the father with complete credibility and, in his best scenes, he is literally stunning in his effectiveness. There are splendid performances, also, by Maureen Stapleton as the long-suffering wife, Brandon de Wilde as the romantic boy, Anthony Ross as a courageous and understanding doctor, Esmond Knight as a friendly member of the Hungarian ruling class, and Mike Kellin and Michael Strong as the stupid but sinister twin policemen. "The Emperor's Clothes" is a drama of strength and intelligence that cannot easily be forgotten.

The New York Times

February 10, 1953

George Tabori's 'The Emperor's Clothes' Is Staged at the Ethel Barrymore

By BROOKS ATKINSON

George Tabori, an amiable Hungarian, has scribbled a play about Budapest in 1930, "The Emperor's Clothes," which opened at the Ethel Barrymore last evening. In this case the word "scribble" is used advisedly. For Mr. Tabori likes to write at random, putting in an amusing bit here and a trenchant bit there—hoping to make a dramatic point through indirection.

The title of this year's play derives from the Hans Christian Andersen fable about the little child who was the only person candid enough to realize that "the Emperor has nothing at all on." In Mr. Tabori's play he is a highly imaginative boy who lives in a world of fantasy and who idolizes his father as a hero.

* * *

Little Ferike, for that is his name, establishes the standard of truth in the play. The serious part of "The Emperor's Clothes" concerns the political tyranny in Budapest and the effect it has on Ferike's father, a teacher dismissed ten years ago for dangerous political expressions. Anxious to get a school again, the father compromises his principles; and little Ferike despises him. At the close of the play the father reinstates himself in his son's adoration—presumably because he finally adheres to the truth.

But Mr. Tabori scribbles away with such amiable facility that it is hard to be sure of any specific meaning. He never sticks to one point for more than a few minutes at a time. Like "Flight Into Egypt" of last season, "The Emperor's Clothes" is a play about moral principle that is lacking in artistic principle as a play. Although it looks profound, it is basically superficial, and too glib to get under the skin of its material.

* * *

Like play: like performance. Lester Polakov has designed an amusing and inventive setting that represents indoors and outdoors, including a star and two smoking chimneys. When the curtain goes up, "The Emperor's Clothes" looks warm and propitious. But Harold Clurman has staged a mannered performance that consists in a series of isolated eruptions. If Mr. Tabori's play had any continuity, the performance would destroy it.

As the tormented father, Lee J. Cobb plays as though he were in the old Group Theatre again. He is studiously bombastic in a performance intellectualized in the style of a doctor's thesis in acting. In the part of the wife and mother, Maureen Stapleton is not exactly brilliant either. She, too, has lost the simplicity that was so overpowering in "The Rose Tattoo."

Some of the acting is straight to the point despite Mr. Tabori's maunderings. In a brief scene as a venomous neighbor, Nydia Westman is lucid and forceful. Anthony Ross makes something humanly credible out of a non-conforming physician. As a taciturn mother-in-law of the old school, Tamara Daykarhanova has a detached, almost silent eloquence of character. And as Ferike, Brandon de Wilde—pudgy, unsmiling, innately honest—is altogether superb. It is easy to believe him because he believes in what he is doing.

"The Emperor's Clothes" would improve as a play if it had his forthright style and moral conviction.

Daily Mirror

February 10, 1953

'Emperor's Clothes' Has Fine Moments

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Robert Whitehead is an intelligent producer. The scripts he picks invariably have merit, and he engages the best available casts for them. Last evening, in association with the Playwrights' Company, he brought George Tabori's "The Emperor's Clothes" to the Ethel Barrymore Theatre.

With it, Whitehead aims at the moon, and though we think he misses the target, he comes sufficiently close to win your respect. There is so much about the new arrival to compel admiration that it is regrettable there isn't quite enough. There are fine moments, but they come too infrequently.

* * *

TABORI IS concerned with an intellectual living in 1930 in Hungary, then, too, a police state. He had been dismissed from his chair at a Budapest university because of what he considered liberal and humane statements. He is now reduced to reading proof on trashy thrillers, but he has a measure of happiness with an adoring son and a wife.

To get a Christmas tree, the imaginative youngster invents a secret society, and initiates his little friend across the way for a fee. This results in his being taken into custody as a conspirator by secret police. The distraught father, in a burst of frustration and fear, destroys the child's dreams and illusions, as he, too, is led away.

But in the end he restores the boy's faith in him by refusing to compromise with the truth under torture. And the mother and son reject the offer of a powerful friend to see them to safety.

* * *

HAROLD CLURMAN has directed "The Emperor's Clothes" with metronome-like calculation, often drawing life from the characters. On occasion, the players seemed to be at loose ends.

However, Lee J. Cobb, as the harassed professor, took the bit in his teeth and literally pounded out an impressive and harrowing performance. Maureen Stapleton, one of our favorite actresses, rose to the most urgent demands of her part, but in between did too much hand-wringing.

Anthony Ross, who seemed to resist directorial pressure best, etched a kindly and honest relative with effective simplicity. Esmond Knight, a renowned Britisher making his American debut, did justice to a suave sophisticate with highly placed relatives. Brandon de Wilde, who was so endearing in "A Member of the Wedding," appeared to be too priggish and stiff.

* * *

LESTER POLAKOV has designed an atmospheric set, a drab flat with remnants of former grandeur.

"The Emperor's Clothes" has overpoweringly dramatic and touching sequences, but it takes much too long to reach them. And it has flashes of humor, which, unfortunately are snuffed out by the enveloping gloom. We suspect there is a more rewarding play here than we saw last night.

There's no doubt about it. Tabori is on the side of the angels, and he can write. Whitehead has certainly brought together a group of distinguished players. But these assets have not always been wisely used.

DAILY NEWS

February 10, 1953

'Emperor's Clothes' Is a Beautifully Staged, Splendidly Acted Drama

By JOHN CHAPMAN

George Tabori's new drama, "The Emperor's Clothes," opened last evening at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre and transformed this edifice into what all theatres were designed for and should always be—a place where one may find imagination, beauty, emotion and intelligence on the part of an author and splendid playing on the part of all actors involved. This Robert Whitehead-Playwrights' company production, directed by Harold Clurman, is the most exciting stage piece I have seen thus far this season.

Tabori, a Hungarian who became a naturalized Englishman, was first represented here a year ago by "Flight Into Egypt," a good and touching play which lacked the dramatic wallop necessary to carry it on to commercial success. With "The Emperor's Clothes" Tabori has found the wallop—most of it quite deliberately theatrical, but why not?—and yet he has maintained the sensitiveness and compassion he showed in his first work.

Rising Police State.

His scene is Budapest. The time is 1930. His people are, mainly, a father and mother and their small son. The father is an unemployed teacher, too talkative and too opinionated for his own good in the rapidly growing police state. The mother is bewildered by the change of fortune the postwar years have brought. The boy is a boy—a devotee of American Western films and fiction, and a lad of fierce loyalty to his father and exuberant imagination.

It is the boy's imagination which gets the family into trouble. He founds a secret society whose entire purpose is illegality, and when one of his chums blabs to some grownup the family becomes suspect and the police descend upon it.

This is the beginning of "The Emperor's Clothes"—a title borrowed from the Hans Christian Andersen fable about the lad who was the only one among all the people who could see clearly and